

"The Hanging of George Kelley"

Playwright

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CHARACTERS

George Kelley	late 30s - criminal
Bob Wilson	late 40s - criminal
Arthur Johnson	late 40s - criminal
Dr. Burnside Foster	early 40s - doctor
Nellie Paul	mid 20s - hotel proprietor
Wilson Lyle	mid 40s - hotel employee
Edward Paul	early 20s - nephew of Nellie
Jacob Hayes	early 20s - cousin of Nellie
William Paul	late 20s- hotel proprietor, husband of Nellie
Sheriff Anderson	mid 30s - Chisago County Sheriff
Postmaster Vaughn	Postmaster of North Branch MN
Marshal Rystrom	Town Marshal for North Branch MN
Jim Hunt	North Branch resident, posse
Franke Foote	North Branch resident, posse
Posse Member 1	
Posse Member 2	
Father Moreau	Catholic priest
Mrs. McDonald	late 40s - neighbor to hotel
Sutton Son 1	late teens - neighbor to hotel
Sutton Son 2	late teens - neighbor to hotel
Brakeman Caldwell	early 40s
Station Agent	mid 40s
Judge Nethaway	county Judge, Kelley's defense attorney
Foreman	for murder trial
Judge	for murder trial

SETTING AND TIME

Beginning on a summer night, 1896, in a small town in rural Minnesota, continuing through the next few days. Then to winter of 1896 in the same town, as well as a jail and the county courthouse. Ending on a spring day in 1897 in the small town again.

SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1	Atop the St. Paul-Duluth express freight train	June 19 1896, midnight
Scene 2	Wyoming, MN train depot.	June 19 1896, 1AM
Scene 3	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN.	June 19 1896, 1:30 AM

ACT II

Scene 1	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN	June 19 th 1896, very early morning
Scene 2	Along the St. Paul-Duluth rail line, N of Wyoming, MN	June 19 th 1896, very early morning
Scene 3	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN	June 19 th 1896, morning
Scene 4	Along the St. Paul-Duluth rail line, N of North Branch, MN	June 20 th , 1896, 1AM
Scene 5	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN	June 20 th , 1896, morning
Scene 6	Tamarack Swamps, NE of North Branch, MN	June 20 th , 1896, noon
Scene 7	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN	June 20 th , 1896, late afternoon

ACT III

Scene 1	Stillwater MN jail cell	Late June, 1896
Scene 2	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN.	November, 1896
Scene 3	Chisago County courthouse jail cell	Mid-March, 1897
Scene 4	Junction Hotel, Wyoming, MN.	Late March 1897

ACT I

SCENE 1

(A clear night, June 1896. Three men ride the roofs of boxcars on the St. Paul-Duluth Express freight. Quiet except for the sound of wind & train clacking. Arthur Johnson is on one car facing stage left practicing his 'quick draw' over and over. Bob Wilson and George Kelley opposite him on another car, facing stage right. Kelley watches Johnson.)

WILSON

(grinning, shouts to scare Johnson)
Don't drop it!

(Johnson fumbles with the gun, manages to not drop it. Glares at Wilson.)

JOHNSON

Now, why would you do a thing like that?

KELLEY

Arthur. Put it away.

(Johnson puts it away, reluctantly.)

Good. That's no pop-gun you have there. A man doesn't take his gun out unless he means to use it.

(Wilson snorts a laugh.)

JOHNSON

(to Kelley)
Have you ever... shot a man?

KELLEY

Well, I have a story about that.

WILSON

(amused, groaning)
Oh, not this again.

KELLEY

(Kelley, ignoring Wilson, stands to perform.)
Many years ago back in '89, my star was rising in [Mr. William Savidges'] repertoire theater. I'd just been promoted to leading man. I purchased my Taylor trunk, and my first fine silk hat with my raise. We played some no-

account town like one of these. Rather a death-trap of a place with its gasoline torches, and hot as hell. But we had played there the year before and made good profit from it.

WILSON

Is that so? And where exactly was this no-account town? What was its name?

KELLEY

There were so many, who can say?

WILSON

You could, I suppose.

KELLEY

(to Johnson)

As we actors did in that day, I went about town the evening before the show, dressed in my finest, on my best behavior to assure the towners that we were upstanding gentlemen and ladies. Picture the scene: some terrible little restaurant, me choking down swill with my best smile for the ugly commoners.

WILSON

And three sheets to the wind, no doubt.

KELLEY

(Quietly angry)

Do not interrupt me again.

(Wilson stops smiling, is quiet. Kelley puts his smile back on.)

A local tough enters, stinking of corn mash booze and calls out: "Whiskey for all!" I politely decline his poison. "That's not what I'm drinking," I tell him. "Drink it," he threatens, "or I'll fill you so full of holes you won't be able to stand up!" The drunken ass. Suddenly, out comes his enormous pistol, a cannon really, and the silly fool points it directly at me. Being a proper gentleman that evening I was dining unarmed. Without thinking, I stand, throw back my chair, angry as a bull, walk straight to the souse, tear open my blouse, place my bare chest on the tip of the gun and shout, "Go on, shoot! You haven't got the guts!"

(Kelley sits back down.)

JOHNSON

(Waiting for the rest of the story)

Well? What happened?

KELLEY

Am I dead? The coward put away his weapon and slunk out! I do well remember a certain young woman went to sleep safe, and well pleased that night.

(Wilson snorts another laugh.)

JOHNSON

So you've never shot a man?

KELLEY

I didn't say that.

JOHNSON

(Waits for more information, none comes)

Why aren't you still on the stage?

KELLEY'S

Ah, well, an envious stage manager fingered me for the theft of the payroll - several thousand dollars - which he himself had purloined! No one took up my side and I was forced to flee. That's when I realized there was real money to be had, on this side of the law. Tax free.

(Train is slowing. Whistle sounds.)

JOHNSON

How did you...

(A lantern shines from stage right. Brakeman Caldwell enters, stage right, holding a lantern, a long steel rod in the other hand.)

CALDWELL

Where are you fellows going?

(All face Caldwell, though Wilson is slow to his feet. No one answers.)

CALDWELL

I asked a question.

KELLEY

Never mind where we're going, when we get there, we'll get off.

CALDWELL

(Lifts his rod.)

I don't think I heard you right.

KELLEY

Deafness is a most unfortunate hazard in your industry.

CALDWELL

Wyoming is coming up. You'd all better get off there. If you're still here after the train departs, you'll be put off without waiting for a stop. I've beaten more than three men off my train. At a time.

JOHNSON

(Draws revolver, aims at Caldwell)

Throw up your hands!

KELLEY

(Looks at Johnson in disbelief, sighs, then draws own revolver. For a few seconds, no one moves. Caldwell is terrified.)

KELLEY

Well, Arthur? What are we to do with this poor brakeman? The fellow was only doing his job.

JOHNSON

His job is to apply the brakes. What's that got to do with us? He should have left us alone.

KELLEY

(sighs)

Very well, then. Shoot him and get it over with.

JOHNSON

(turns to look at Kelley)

I... I didn't... I wasn't...

KELLEY

Then why did you draw your weapon? Don't you listen? Only do it if you mean to use it.

WILSON

Don't be such a prude. It's a perfectly good use of a gun to scare people.

KELLEY

(to Wilson)

Then the inherent power of the gun is wasted! All meaning and efficacy is lost. You betray the trust those who manufactured it, as well as the salesmen and politicians who work so hard to instill the gun with such great might. You shame them. You shame America itself.

WILSON

What in the hell are you going on about?

KELLEY

(to Johnson)

Arthur, there is a real deficit of gunfire on this train.

JOHNSON

I don't think I can shoot him.

KELLEY

At least throw him off the car, then!

CALDWELL

The hell you will.

(Caldwell leaps on Johnson as he's not looking. Caldwell stumbles, accidentally hits Johnson in the head with lantern. Johnson throws a few ineffectual punches at Caldwell with one hand. Kelley shoots twice above their heads. Johnson and Caldwell stop fighting, turn to see Kelley and Wilson aiming at them. Both Johnson and Caldwell drop to the floor.)

KELLEY

Oh, get up Arthur.

(Johnson slowly gets up.)

Come over here.

(Johnson jumps to their car.)

Stand up, brakeman.

(Caldwell stands shakily.)

What's your name?

CALDWELL

(pleading)

Samuel Caldwell, sir, I've a family, a wife, four children...

KELLEY

(interrupts)

Samuel Caldwell, if I am called on to draw my revolver, I am also tasked with the burden of discharging it.

(Train is slowing to a stop now. Kelley aims his weapon up and down Caldwell's body, as if he's trying to decide where to shoot.)

CALDWELL

No, sir, please, I beg you...

(Gunshot. Kelley has shot the light out of Caldwell's lantern. Wilson whoops, grabs Johnson by the arm and they exit the back of the train, stage left. Caldwell falls to his knees in relief, looks up to Kelley who has put away his gun.)

KELLEY

(Clears throat like making a speech)

"All memories will someday become beautiful when the last annoyance that encumbers them shall have faded out of our minds." Of course, I'm paraphrasing.

(Kelley looks for a reaction)

Twain? Innocents Abroad? No? Ah well. Would you like to know why I didn't shoot you?

(Caldwell can't speak.)

I was a railman once, like you. Back in California. I had a family, children, too.

(Caldwell stares at him.)

Be certain to tell them of your adventure today.

WILSON

(off-stage, shouting)

Come on!

(Kelley tips his hat to Caldwell, calmly walks off stage left. When he's gone, Caldwell gets up and runs off, stage right.)

SCENE 2

(Platform of the Wyoming, MN train station, a relatively ornate structure for such a small town. Johnson, Wilson and Kelley make their way from stage left to stage right to hide behind bushes. They are visible to the audience, not other characters. Wilson, in the initial stages of moderate Delirium Tremens, struggles more than the others. Wilson walks all the way stage right, turns his back to the audience, stands as if he's pissing on the side of something. Comes back to Kelley and Johnson.)

WILSON

That was lousy luck.

KELLEY

(To Johnson)

And if you'd have kept your gun holstered we could have kept a bad situation from going worse! (to Wilson) And to hell with you and your damned luck!

WILSON

Calm down, you'll wake the whole town!

JOHNSON

I'm sorry... Mr. Kelley... I thought...

KELLEY

(quietly raging)

I had half a mind to shoot him, and then you just to make my point.

WILSON

(sarcastic)

Well, that wouldn't have made anything worse.

KELLEY

What you fail to comprehend is that instead of being stuck out here in the middle of the night in this one horse town full of rubes and bumpkins, we're stuck out here in the middle of night in this one horse town, AND word is racing up and down the wires that three desperadoes are shooting at railmen! Every brakeman, conductor, station agent, sheriff, deputy, and cretin with a shotgun will be on the look-out for us by morning.

(Kelley stands, gives a muffled shout in anger, stands, then moves off to pee where Wilson went.)

JOHNSON

(whispers)

He's terribly angry.

WILSON

(Sits with effort. Dizzy, headache.)

Forget it. Whenever our luck goes sour, he gets like that. It'll pass. Let him be.

KELLEY

(returning)

You two horses asses wait here. I'll have a walk around, I'll work out a plan, I'll get us out of here. But try, just try to keep your guns put away until I get back. Can you do that?

(Kelley walks off without waiting for an answer, stage right. Johnson and Wilson get comfortable. Wilson tips a bit to one side, holding his stomach.)

WILSON

Sure could use a drink.

JOHNSON

Are you alright?

WILSON

Oh, had a bit of drinking jag back in Mahtomedi, is all. Catching up with me now.

(Stands up, wobbly, sits back down.)

JOHNSON

Were you an actor too? Is that how you met Mr. Kelley?

WILSON

(Looks at Johnson, trying to decide how stupid he is.)

'Mr. Kelley' was no famous actor. He was never in any rep theater.

JOHNSON

That story...

WILSON

He heard a real actor tell that. I know because I was there. He went on for days about that story, about the American character, true grit, triumph of the spirit and the common man. All kinds of nonsense over a story that was likely that other sap's invention. And stop calling him Mr. Kelley, or sir, or anything of the sort. Gives him a big head.

JOHNSON

Should I call him George?

WILSON

(terrified)

Absolutely not! You've been with us for how many months now? Don't you know anything?

JOHNSON

But no one tells me anything!

WILSON

Alright, what do you want to know?

JOHNSON

(pauses to think)

I don't know. Where were you born?

WILSON

Missouri. Not all that far from your own hometown.

JOHNSON

And Kelley? Where's his home?

WILSON

Well, that's hard to say.

JOHNSON

You don't know where he was born?

WILSON

That's just it, a man's birthplace isn't always his home.

JOHNSON

I don't understand. You're born somewhere, your family lives in that same somewhere. That's home.

WILSON

That is a right pleasant outlook. But, say your family is gone? What if your family was tore up in the war? Scattered all over the country? Home is full of strangers. Where's home then?

JOHNSON

I guess a man finds another home.

WILSON

Naw. Kelley doesn't like when I say it, but it's all just luck. Luck finds you a new home. Or not.

JOHNSON

God guides you.

WILSON

You could call it that.

JOHNSON

You don't believe in God?

WILSON

I don't disbelieve in God.

JOHNSON

I don't understand.

WILSON

That's alright.

(Wilson's nose has begun bleeding. Kelley returns, stage right.)

KELLEY

You can hardly even call this a town. We should have stayed in White Bear.

WILSON

(Trying to hide his nosebleed from Kelley.)

I said that then!

KELLEY

And I commend your perceptivity. What's wrong with you?

JOHNSON

It's a junction town, it can't be that small.

KELLEY

(to Johnson)

Let's just say we won't be robbing the bank.

WILSON

There isn't one?

KELLEY

Correct.

(looking closer at Wilson.)

Is your nose bleeding?

WILSON

(Dabbing at his nose, turns his head away from Kelley)

Is there an opera hall? You could stage a production, Mr. Star Actor.

(The sound of a train whistle in the distance, stage left.)

KELLEY

(Watches Bob trying to hide his symptoms.)

Damn it Bob, did you think I wouldn't notice? Did this just come on?

WILSON

(Nods)

A drink would take the edge off.

KELLEY

Alright, then. We keep our plan simple. Everyone in town is asleep. We break into a select home or two, take what we can, then start north along the tracks.

WILSON

What will burglarizing get us out here? A loaf of bread? A live chicken? Twenty cents?

KELLEY

We have arrived at an unfortunate zenith in our travels, no doubt about it. However, we can take steps to extract ourselves...

(looks pointedly at Johnson)

...and to not exacerbate the situation.

WILSON

Something will go wrong. And I still won't get that drink.

KELLEY

We will, I assure you.

(Sounds of a train stopping at the station, the three NDWs hide and turn to watch. From stage left comes Dr. Burnside Foster, hurriedly. Dr. Foster is a dapper gentleman, well-dressed, a touch out of breath, a bit frantic. Foster looks around, then out across the audience, sees what he's looking for and hurries off.)

WILSON

(to Kelley)

Well then.

KELLEY

Well then, indeed.

WILSON

(starting to get the shakes)

You have to admit, it certainly smacks of good luck, no?

KELLEY

Let's see what we can make of it.

JOHNSON

(not understanding)

What are we making?

KELLEY

(sighs)

Perhaps we should put you on the next train south, back to Missouri. You've just not the makings of a desperado.

JOHNSON

(crestfallen)

Why not?

KELLEY

Stop and consider for a moment the most likely source of income you've seen in the last twenty-four hours.

JOHNSON

(thinking hard for much too long)

You want to rob the gentleman?

WILSON

No, we'd like to give him money.

KELLEY

(looking off stage right)

He's woken someone at the hotel.

FOSTER

(off-stage)

I can pay you well. I'll make it worth your while.

WILSON

A rich doctor and a hotel in one night. The town of Wyoming is beginning to grow on me.

JOHNSON

(nervously)

Where there's a hotel, there's shotguns.

WILSON

(looks at Johnson, displeased, then at Kelley apprehensively)

Ain't no time for cowards. We need to move while they're all in one room.

JOHNSON

I'm no coward!

KELLEY

You stay out here and keep a look out. Bob and I will do the thing. Call out if there's trouble.

(Johnson nods, takes his pistol out. Wilson and Kelley head stage right.)

KELLEY

(helps up Wilson whose condition is worsening)

Come, let's get you that drink.

WILSON

(Just before they walk off stage)

Gonna have to do something about that boy.

KELLEY

Yes. He's not turning out as useful as I'd hoped.